



Book Review

Capitalism Magic Thailand: Modernity with Enchantment

By Peter A Jackson. 2022. Singapore: ISEAS Publishing/Yusof Ishak Institute. 381 pages.
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Capitalism Magic Thailand: Modernity with Enchantment presents a fascinating exploration of how capitalism and enchantment—magic, spiritual beliefs, and religious traditions—are deeply intertwined in contemporary Thai society. In this study, Peter A. Jackson argues that, despite Thailand’s rapid modernization and economic growth, magical practices and beliefs remain integral to both individual lives and national prosperity. Modern capitalism in Thailand has not eradicated magical beliefs; rather, these beliefs have been incorporated into capitalist practices. The author explores the commercial aspects of amulets and rituals, demonstrating how magic is used as a tool for financial success, blending the sacred with the profane.

Jackson challenges Weber’s foundational assertion that the expansion of modernity and capitalism will lead to a growing rationalization of human beings, ultimately resulting in the disenchantment of the world. By contrast, Jackson reveals a new dimension of the sacred that emerges from the expansion of the modern world under the governance of neoliberal capitalism, which seamlessly integrates with contemporary capitalist lifestyles.

The book’s chapters are arranged into three sections, respectively focusing on the broader comparative setting and the specific case studies of the cults of wealth, amulets, and spiritual possession. Part one focuses on a duality in Thai Buddhism, where practitioners strategically manage their beliefs by keeping controversial practices private while publicly conforming to orthodox traditions. Part two explains Thailand’s cults of wealth and conceptual frames in analyzing the characteristics of the cult of amulets and professional spirit mediumship in Thailand. Here, Jackson illuminates the diversity of beliefs and practices that exist within Thai religiosity by highlighting the connections between political and economic processes and the growing wealth-oriented practices among the elite and middle classes. Part three focuses on the relationship between capitalist modernity and enchantment, presenting how modernity, pace Weber, makes magic. The book concludes by asserting the imbricated set of forces actively producing, through media technology, the auraticization of possession and creating new forms of magical enchantment within global modernity.

Through a case study of the growth of the cult of wealth in Thai society, Jackson reveals a new dimension of sacredness emerging in response to the modern world’s liberal capitalist expansion. In contemporary Thai society, the unpredictability of economic outcomes has created a sense of insecurity, driving demand for reassurance and comfort. This has fueled the growth of “faith marketing” (10) in which Thailand’s cults of



wealth have contributed to social cohesion through the commodification of religious products. These new religious expressions reflect the impact of new economic arrangements upon a complex Buddhist culture. Capitalism and mass media have played a crucial role in amplifying the sacredness of objects and figures deemed to possess supernatural powers. This has led to the widespread acceptance of various forms of worship in Thailand, from the Chinese veneration of Guanyin to Hindu deities like Brahma and Ganesha, and local spirit mediums. The fusion of these diverse beliefs onto traditional Thai Buddhist practices reflects a broader trend of ritual adaptation. However, this commodification of spirituality raises questions about the commercialization of faith and its ethical implications for society.

The cults of wealth have at times been misunderstood as residues of premodern superstitions and they have been critiqued by doctrinal Buddhists as perverse commodifications that debase Thai religion. These views, which position doctrinal Buddhism as an ideal religious form, hinder the development of a balanced appreciation of how the cults of wealth have emerged and the important roles they play in the religious lives of large numbers of Thais from all social strata across all regions of the country. (3)

Jackson's work is important reading for scholars and students of popular Buddhism in Thailand as he reflects on how religious symbols and rituals are commodified and marketed in a way that complements rather than contradicts the goals of modern capitalism. He also discusses how traditional beliefs have adapted to urban centers like Bangkok, where global forces of modernization are strongest, and yet where many still turn to rituals or seek out spiritual guidance for success. Jackson's case studies illustrate the persistence of magic in an urban, globalized setting.

Jackson emphasizes that religious life in this context is not about adherence to doctrinal teachings, but rather about practical rituals, such as seeking blessings and worshiping icons and sacred entities. This constitutes the cult of wealth. The growth of this cult may stem from state control over Buddhism, which has become a variable that stimulates the establishment of the cult of wealth within the currents of populist culture. This facilitates the emergence of new rituals centered on the commercialization of the sacred, aimed at providing individuals with comfort and the illusion that they will attain wealth in the future.

Jackson examines the central role of both living and deceased monks in Thai wealth worship. These monks are often associated with protective amulets and rituals believed to bring prosperity and safety, attracting devotees who seek to enhance their fortunes. Jackson highlights creative faith marketing, such as combining the names of revered monks like Luang Pho Chorp, Luang Pho Ngoen, and Luang Pho Sot (19). The names of the three monks printed in large letters spell out the Thai sentence "I Like Cash" (Chorp Ngoen Sot) to symbolize wealth, with the use of names in devotional posters featuring ten auspiciously named magic monks, which collectively suggest prosperity (205). This reflects the dynamic interaction between spirituality, commerce, and cultural adaptation in contemporary Thai society.

Jackson's writing presents complex content and propositions that are genuinely interesting, but his attempt to present diverse case studies from Thai society comes with a lack of detailed information regarding the origins and methods involved in the construction of sacredness. He might have attended more to the creation of new narratives and the enhancement of sacredness which facilitate the establishment of beliefs. My research (Sanpinit and Tansrisook 2020) has shown that amulets in animist magazines are presented as fortune bringers, using characters and magic from many types of stories. For example, the demonic Rāhu has transformed from an ominous symbol to one of positive significance, leading to a surge in the production of his amulets. Now linked to Buddhism, Rāhu is recognized as both a deity and a bodhisattva, embodying auspiciousness and

attracting wealth and good fortune. Animist magazines effectively capitalize on this belief system, reinforcing Rāhu's importance within the gambling industry as well as the amulet industry.

Capitalism Magic Thailand vividly displays spirituality playing a crucial role in navigating the uncertainties of a fast-moving neoliberal economy. Miraculous stories of success, such as winning lotteries or rapidly thriving businesses, demonstrate that sacred entities are not merely seen as sources of emotional comfort during economic hardships, but are regarded as powerful forces with real influence over tangible outcomes in everyday life. For the devout, these entities are believed to actively shape destiny and success, whether personal or business-related. Lavish offerings and elaborate rituals reflect the belief that success is not solely the result of hard work or planning, but also requires the intervention of supernatural forces. This integration of spiritual and economic dimensions enables individuals to manage their lives and enterprises amidst uncertainty, with the sacred acting as a conduit through which hope, aspirations, and success are realized in a world fraught with risks and unpredictability.

Previous reviews have rightly asserted the book's academic value in contributing to discussions of capitalism, religion, and cultural studies in Southeast Asia. However, some critiques suggest the book's binary models might oversimplify complex realities. Jackson's focus on the positive integration of magic into capitalism may overlook deeper societal inequalities. While Jackson convincingly illustrates the compatibility of magic and capitalism, he neglects how these beliefs might reinforce class distinctions by suggesting that wealth is divinely ordained, rather than a product of social inequality. Additionally, Jackson's argument would benefit from a more extensive engagement with broader theoretical frameworks. While his work is grounded in anthropology and religious studies, integrating concepts from cultural economics or global studies could provide additional layers of analysis. For example, examining how Thailand's spiritual economy fits into global trends of commodification or how magical practices operate within the logic of neoliberal capitalism worldwide could enrich discussion.

That said, *Capitalism Magic Thailand* successfully highlights the cultural complexities of a modern Thailand, where magic and capitalism do not merely coexist but mutually thrive. It provides a valuable lens through which we can understand how traditional beliefs and relics are not merely remnants of the past but are actively shaping contemporary life. It presents innovative research that shows how spiritual beliefs are not incompatible with modernization; in fact, they actively contribute to the economic and social dynamics of precisely what is contemporary in Thai society. The book's unique integration of anthropology, religious studies, and economics makes it an essential contribution to understanding contemporary Thailand. Its blending of the sacred and the commercial reflects a complex understanding of how belief systems and economic practices are intertwined in society.

The book reflects contemporary Thai society within the context of Thai Buddhism, revealing a collection of religious artifacts that blend elements of spirits, Buddhism, Brahmanism, and astrological beliefs, showcasing a sacred power related to fortune and destiny. Beliefs once considered marginal have shifted into the mainstream, merging with various others to form new religious practices—a proliferation of fragmented belief-based businesses that are undergoing a process of Buddhacization. Across social classes, a shared belief in the fusion of Buddhism and animism—where people express their faith in deities and spirits, all with the common goal of achieving wealth and prosperity—provides empirical evidence that superstition, alongside other religious beliefs, has shaped a unique belief system in Thailand.

Thus, Jackson shows that modernities of technology and rationality do not diminish the potency of traditional beliefs; rather, they function as a communication tool for devotees, facilitating the spread of beliefs that transcend geographical contexts between followers and the sacred. Simultaneously, this dynamic creates

an ongoing production of desires. According to Pattana Kitiarsa, “when Asia’s major religious traditions are commodified, they do not lose their symbolic power and efficacy. They intimately embrace the ... forces of the market” (2008: 8). This understanding of the dynamics of belief in the contemporary world illustrates that, regardless of the passage of time, these beliefs endure throughout history.

In sum, *Capitalism Magic Thailand* offers critical insights through which scholars can understand the persistence of traditional beliefs in the modern world. The book’s interdisciplinary approach makes it a valuable resource for anyone studying Buddhism and the cultural dimensions of capitalist modernity in Southeast Asia. Ultimately, this work not only serves as a significant source of information, but will also stimulate profound discussions about the role of belief systems in rapidly changing societies.

References

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